MY LADY'S MONEY

By WILKIE COLLINS.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Sharon's news was not of an encouraging character. He had met with serious difficulties, and had spent the last farthing of Moody's money in attempting to overcome them.

One discovery of importance he had certainly made. A horse withdrawn from the sale was the only horse that had met with Hardyman's approval. He had secured the animal at the high reserved price of twelve thousand francs—being four hundred and eighty pounds in English money—and he had paid with an English bank note. The seller (a French horse dealer resident in Brussels) had returned to Belgium immediately on completing the negotiation. Sharon had ascertained his address, and had written to him at Brussels, inclosing the number of the lost bank-note. In two days he had received an answer informing him that the horse dealer had been called to England by the illness of a relative, and that he had hitherto failed to send any address to which his letters could be forwarded. Hearing this, and having exhausted his funds, Sharon had returned to London. It now rested with Moody to decide whether the course of the inquiry should follow the horse dealer next. There was the cash account, showing how the money had been spent. And there was Sharon, with his pipe in his mouth and his dog on his lap, waiting for orders.

Moody wisely took time to consider before he committed himself to a decision. In the meanwhile he ventured to recommend a new course of proceeding which Sharon's report had suggested to his mind.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we have taken the roundabout way of getting to our end in view, when the straight road lay before us. If Mr. Hardyman has passed the stolen note, you know as well as I do that he has passed it innocently. Instead of wasting time and money in trying to trace a stranger, why not tell Mr. Hardyman what has happened, and ask him to give us the number of the note? You can't think of everything, I know; but it does seem strange that this idea didn't occur to you before you went to France."

"Mr. Moody," said Old Sharon, "I shall have to cut your acquaintance. You are a man without faith; I don't like you. As if I hadn't thought of Hardyman weeks since!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "Are you really soft enough to suppose that a gentleman in his position would talk about his money affairs to me? You know mighty little of him if you do. A fortnight since I sent one of my men (most respectably dressed) to hang about his farm and see what information he could pick up. My man became painfully acquainted with the toe of a boot. It was thick, sir; and it was Hardyman's."

"I will run the risk of the boot," Moody replied, in his quiet way.

"And put the question to Hardyman?"

"Yes."

"Very good," said Sharon. "If you get your answer from his tongue instead of his boot the case is at an end—unless I have made a complete mess of it. Look here, Moody! If you want to do me a good turn, tell the lawyer that the guinea opinion was the right one. Let him know that *he* was the fool, not you, when he buttoned up his pockets and refused to trust me. And, I say!" pursued Old Sharon, relapsing into his customary impudence, "you're in love, you know, with that nice girl. I like her myself. When you marry her invite me to the wedding. I'll make a sacrifice—I'll brush my hair and wash my face in honor of the occasion."

"Tell the lawyer that the guinea opinion was the right one."

Returning to his lodgings, Moody found two letters waiting on the table. One of them bore the South Morden postmark. He opened that letter first.

It was written by Miss Pink. The first lines contained an urgent entreaty to keep the circumstances connected with the loss of the five hundred pounds the strictest secret from every one in general, and from Hardyman in particular. The reasons assigned for making the strange request were next expressed in these terms: "My niece Isabel is, I am happy to inform you, engaged to be married to Mr. Hardyman. If the slightest hint reached him of her having been associated, no matter how cruelly and unjustly, with a suspicion of theft, the marriage would be broken off, and the result to herself and to everybody connected with her would be disgrace for the rest of our lives."

On the blank space at the foot of the page a few words were added in Isabel's writing: "Whatever changes there may be in my life, your place in my heart is one that no other person can fill; it is the place of my dearest friend. Pray write and tell me that you are not distressed and not angry. My one anxiety is that you should remember what I have always told you about the state of my own feelings. My one wish is that you will still let me love you and value you as I might have loved and valued a brother."

The letter dropped from Moody's hands. Not a word, not even a sigh, passed his lips. In fearless silence he submitted to the pang that wrung him—in fearless silence he contemplated the wreck of his life.

CHAPTER XIX.

The narrative returns to South Morden, and follows the events which attended Isabel's marriage engagement.

To say that Miss Pink, inflated by triumph, rose morally speaking, from the earth, and floated among the clouds, is to indicate faintly the effect produced on the ex-schoolmistress when her niece first informed her of what had happened at the farm. Attacked on one side by her aunt and on the other by Hardyman, and feebly defended, at the best, by her own doubts and misgivings, Isabel ended in surrendering at discretion. Like thousands of other women in a similar position, she was in the least degree uncertain as to the state of her own heart. To what extent she was insensibly influenced by Hardyman's commanding position in believing herself to be sincerely attached to him, it was beyond her power of self-examination to discover. He doubly dazzled her by his birth and by his celebrity. Not in England only, but throughout Europe, he was a recognized authority on his own subject. How could she—how could any woman—resist the influence of his steady mind, his firmness of purpose, his manly resolution to owe everything to himself and nothing to his rank, set off, as these attractive qualities were, by the outward and personal advantages which exercise an ascendancy of their own? Isabel was fascinated, and yet Isabel was not at ease. In her lonely moments she was troubled by regretful thoughts of Moody, which perplexed and irritated her. She had always behaved honestly to him; she had never encouraged him to hope that his love for her had the faintest prospect of being returned. Yet, knowing as she did that her conduct was blameless so far, there were nevertheless perverse sympathies in her which took his part. In the wakeful hours of the night there were whispering voices which said: Think of Moody! Had there been a growing kindness toward this good friend in her heart, of which she was herself not aware? She tried to detect it—to weigh it for what it was really worth. But it lay too deep to be discovered and estimated, if it did really exist—if it had any sounder origin than her own morbid fancy. In the broad light of day, in the little bustling duties of life, she forgot it again. She could think of what she ought to wear on the wedding day; she could even try privately how her new signature, "Isabel Hardyman," would look when she had the right to use it. On the whole, it may be said that the time passed smoothly, with some occasional checks and drawbacks, which were the more easily endured seeing that they took their rise in Isabel's own conduct. Compliant as she was in general, there were two instances, among others, in which her resolution to take her own way was not to be overcome. She refused to write either to Moody or to Lady Lydiard informing them of her engagement, and she steadily disapproved of Miss Pink's policy of concealment in the matter of the robbery at Lady Lydiard's house. Her aunt could only secure her as a passive accomplice by stating family considerations in the strongest possible terms. "If the disgrace was confined to you, my dear, I might leave you to decide. But I am involved in it, as your nearest relative; and, what is more, even the sacred memories of your father and mother might feel the slur cast on them." This exaggerated language—like all exaggerated language, a mischievous weapon in the arsenal of weakness and prejudice—had its effect on Isabel. Reluctantly and sadly she consented to be silent.

Miss Pink wrote word of the engagement to Moody first, reserving to a later day the superior pleasure of informing Lady Lydiard of the very event which that audacious woman had declared to be impossible. To her aunt's surprise, just as she was about to close the envelope, Isabel stepped forward, and inconsistently requested leave to add a postscript to the very letter which she had refused to write! Miss Pink was not even permitted to see the postscript. Isabel secured the envelope the moment she had laid down her pen, and retired to her room with a headache (which was heartache in disguise) for the rest of the day.

While the question of the marriage was still in debate, an event occurred which exercised a serious influence on Hardyman's future plans.

He received a letter from the Continent which claimed his immediate attention. One of the sovereigns of Europe had decided on making some radical changes in the mounting and equipment of a cavalry regiment, and he required the assistance of Hardyman in that important part of the contemplated reform which was connected with the choice and purchase of horses. Setting his own interests out of the question, Hardyman owed obligations to the kindness of his illustrious correspondent which made it impossible for him to send an excuse. In a fortnight's time, at the latest, it would be necessary for him to leave England, and a month or more might elapse before it would be possible for him to return.

Under these circumstances he proposed, in his own precipitate way, to hasten the date of the marriage. The necessary legal delay would permit the ceremony to be performed on that day fortnight. Isabel might then accompany him on his journey and spend a brilliant honeymoon at the foreign court. She at once refused not only to accept this proposal, but even to take it into consideration. While Miss Pink dwelt eloquently on the shortness of the notice, Miss Pink's niece based her resolution on far more important grounds. Hardyman had not yet announced the contemplated marriage to his parents and friends, and Isabel was determined not to become his wife until she could be first assured of a courteous and tolerant reception by the family, if she could hope for no warmer welcome at their hands.

Hardyman was not a man who yielded easily, even in trifles. In the present case his dearest interests were concerned in inducing Isabel to reconsider her decision. He was still vainly trying to shake her resolution when the afternoon post brought a letter for Miss Pink, which introduced a new element of disturbance into the discussion. The letter was nothing less than Lady Lydiard's reply to the written announcement of Isabel's engagement, dispatched on the previous day by Miss Pink.

Her ladyship's answer was a surprisingly short one. It only contained these lines:

"Lady Lydiard begs to acknowledge the receipt of Miss Pink's letter requesting that she will say nothing to Mr. Hardyman of the loss of a bank note in her house, and assigning as a reason that Miss Isabel Miller is engaged to be married to Mr. Hardyman, and might be prejudiced in his estimation if the facts were made known. Miss Pink may make her mind easy. Lady Lydiard has not the slightest intention of taking Mr. Hardyman into her confidence on the subject of her domestic affairs. With regard to the proposed marriage, Lady Lydiard casts no doubt on Miss Pink's perfect sincerity and good faith; but, at the same time, she positively declines to believe that Mr. Hardyman means to make Miss Isabel Miller his wife. Lady L. will yield to the evidence of a properly attested certificate—and to nothing else."

A folded piece of paper, directed to Isabel, dropped out of this characteristic letter as Miss Pink turned from the first page to the second. Lady Lydiard addressed her adopted daughter in these words:

"I was on the point of leaving home to visit you again, when I received your aunt's letter. My poor, deluded child, no words can tell how distressed I am about you. You are already sacrificed to the folly of the most foolish woman living. For God's sake, take care you do not fall a victim next to the designs of a profligate man! Come to me instantly, Isabel, and I promise to take care of you."

Fortified by these letters, and aided by Miss Pink's indignation, Hardyman pressed his proposal on Isabel with renewed resolution. She made no attempt to combat his arguments—she only held firmly by her decision. Without some encouragement from Hardyman's father and mother she still steadily refused to become his wife. Irritated already by Lady Lydiard's letters, he lost the self-command which so eminently distinguished him in the ordinary affairs of life, and showed the domineering and despotic temper which was an inbred part of his disposition. Isabel's high spirit at once resented the harsh terms in which he spoke to her. In the plainest words she released him from his engagement, and, without waiting for his excuses, quitted the room.

Left together, Hardyman and Miss Pink devised an arrangement which paid due respect to Isabel's scruples, and at the same time met Lady Lydiard's insulting assertion of disbelief in Hardyman's honor, by a formal and public announcement of the marriage.

It was proposed to give a garden party at the farm in a week's time, for the express purpose of introducing Isabel to Hardyman's family and friends in the character of his betrothed wife. If his father and mother accepted the invitation, Isabel's only objection to hastening their union would fall to the ground. Hardyman might, in that case, plead with his imperial correspondent for a delay in his departure of a few days more; and the marriage might still take place before he left England. Isabel, at Miss Pink's intercession, was induced to accept her lover's excuses, and, in the event of her favorable reception by Hardyman's parents at the farm, to give her consent (not very willingly even yet) to hastening the ceremony which was to make her Hardyman's wife.

On the next morning the whole of the invitations were sent out, excepting the invitation to Hardyman's father and mother. Without mentioning it to Isabel, Hardyman decided on personally appealing to his mother before he ventured on taking the head of the family into his confidence.

The result of the interview was partially successful—and no more. Lord Rotherfield declined to see his youngest son; and he had engagements which would, under any circumstances, prevent his being present at the garden party. But, at the express request of Lady Rotherfield, he was willing to make certain concessions.

Hardyman and Miss Pink.

"I have always regarded Alfred as a barely sane person," said his lordship, "since he turned his back on his prospects to become a horse dealer. If we decline altogether to sanction this new act—I won't say of insanity, I will say of absurdity—on his part, it is impossible to predict to what discreditable extremities he may not proceed. We must temporize with Alfred. In the meantime I shall endeavor to obtain some information respecting this young person—named Miller, I think you said, and now resident at South Morden. If I am satisfied that she is a woman of reputable character, possessing an average education and presentable manners, we may as well let Alfred take his own way. He is out of the pale of society as it is; and Miss Miller has no father and mother to complicate matters, which is distinctly a merit on her part—and, in short, if the marriage is not absolutely disgraceful, the wisest way (as we have no power to prevent it) will be to submit. You will say nothing to Alfred about what I propose to do. I tell you plainly I don't trust him. You will simply inform him from me that I want time to consider, and that, unless he hears to the contrary in the interval, he may expect to have the sanction of your presence at his breakfast, or luncheon, or whatever it is. I must go to town in a day or two, and I shall ascertain what Alfred's friends know about this last of his many follies, if I meet any of them at the club."

Returning to South Morden in no serene frame of mind, Hardyman found Isabel in a state of depression which perplexed and alarmed him.

The news that his mother might be expected to be present at the garden party failed to raise her spirits. The only explanation she gave of the change in her was that the dull, heavy weather of the last few days made her feel a little languid and nervous. Naturally dissatisfied with this reply to his inquiries, Hardyman asked for Miss Pink. He was informed that Miss Pink could not see him. She was constitutionally subject to asthma, and having warnings of a return of the malady, she was (by the doctor's advice) keeping her room. Hardyman returned to the farm in a temper which was felt by everybody in his employment, from the trainer to the stableboys.

While the apology made for Miss Pink stated no more than the plain truth, it must be confessed that Hardyman was right in declining to be satisfied with Isabel's excuse for the melancholy that oppressed her. She had that morning received Moody's answer to the lines which she had addressed to him at the end of her aunt's letter, and she had not yet recovered from the effect which it had produced on her spirits.

"It is impossible for me to say honestly that I am not distressed" (Moody wrote) "by the news of your marriage engagement. The blow has fallen very heavily on me. When I look at the future now I see only a dreary blank. This is not your fault; you are in no way to blame. I remember the time when I should have been too angry to own this—when I might have said or done things which I should have bitterly repented afterward. That time is past. My temper has been softened since I have befriended you in your troubles. That good at least has come out of my foolish hopes, and perhaps also out of the true sympathy which I have felt for you. I can honestly ask you to accept my heart's dearest wishes for your happiness, and I can keep the rest to myself.

"Let me say a word now relating to the efforts that I have made to help you since that sad day when you left Lady Lydiard's house.

"I had hoped (for reasons which it is needless to mention here) to interest Mr. Hardyman himself in aiding our inquiry. But your aunt's wishes, as expressed in her letter to me, close my lips. I will only say this, at some convenient time, to let me mention the last discoveries that we have made, leaving it to your discretion, when Mr. Hardyman has become your husband, to ask him the questions which, under other circumstances, I should have put to him myself.

"It is, of course, possible that the view I take of Mr. Hardyman's capacity to help us may be a mistaken one. In this case, if you still wish the investigation to be privately carried on, I beg of you to let me continue to direct it, as the greatest favor you can confer on your devoted old friend.

"You need be under no apprehension about the expense to which you are likely to put me. I have unexpectedly inherited what is to me a handsome fortune.

"The same post which brought your aunt's letter brought a line from a lawyer, asking me to see him on the subject of my late father's affairs. I waited a day or two before I could summon heart enough to see him, or to see anybody, and then I went to his office. You have heard that my father's bank stopped payment, at a time of commercial panic. His failure was mainly attributed to the treachery of a friend to whom he had lent a large sum of money, and who paid him the yearly interest without acknowledging that every farthing of it had been lost in unsuccessful speculations. The son of this man has prospered in business, and he has honorably devoted a part of his wealth to the payment of his father's creditors. Half the sum due my father has thus passed into my hands as his next of kin, and the other half to follow in course of time. If my hopes had been fulfilled, how gladly I should have shared my prosperity with you! As it is, I have far more than enough for my wants as a lonely man, and plenty left to spend in your service.

"God bless and prosper you, my dear. I shall ask you to accept a little present from me, among the other offerings that are made to you before the wedding day.

"R. M."

The studiously considerate and delicate tone in which these lines were written had an effect on Isabel which was exactly the opposite of the effect intended by the writer. She burst into a passionate fit of tears, and in the safe solitude of her own room the despairing words escaped her, "I wish I had died before I met with Alfred Hardyman!"

As the days wore on, disappointments and difficulties seemed, by a kind of fatality, to beset the contemplated announcement of the marriage.

Miss Pink's asthma, developed by the unfavorable weather, set the doctor's art at defiance, and threatened to keep that unfortunate lady a prisoner in her room on the day of the party. Hardyman's invitations were in some cases refused, and in others accepted by husbands, with excuses for the absence of their wives. His elder brother made an apology for himself as well as for his wife. Felix Sweetsir wrote, "With pleasure, dear Alfred, if my health permits me to leave the house." Lady Lydiard, invited at Miss Pink's special request, sent no reply. The one encouraging circumstance was the silence of Lady Rotherfield. So long as her son received no intimation to the contrary, it was a sign that Lord Rotherfield permitted his wife to sanction the marriage by her presence.

Hardyman wrote to his imperial correspondent, engaging to leave England on the earliest possible day, and asking to be pardoned if he failed to express himself more definitely, in consideration of domestic affairs which it was necessary to settle before he started for the continent. If there should not be time enough to write again, he promised to send a telegraphic announcement of his departure. Long afterward Hardyman remembered the misgivings that had troubled him when he wrote that letter. In the rough draft of it he had mentioned, as his excuse for not being yet certain of his own movements, that he expected to be immediately married. In the fair copy the vague foreboding of some accident to come was so painfully present to his mind that he struck out the words which referred to his marriage and substituted the designedly indefinite phrase, "domestic affairs."

CHAPTER XX.

The day of the garden party arrived. There was no rain, but the air was heavy, and the sky was overcast by lowering clouds.

Some hours before the guests were expected Isabel arrived alone at the farm, bearing the apologies of unfortunate Miss Pink, still kept a prisoner in her bedchamber by the asthma. In the confusion produced at the cottage by the preparations for entertaining the company, the one room in which Hardyman could receive Isabel, with the certainty of not being interrupted, was the smoking room. To this haven of refuge he led her—still reserved and silent, still not restored to her customary spirits. "If any visitors come before the time," Hardyman said to his servant, "tell them I am engaged at the stables—I must have an hour's quiet talk with you," he continued, turning to Isabel, "or I shall be in too bad a temper to receive my guests with common politeness. The worry of giving this party is not to be told in words. I almost wish I had been content with presenting you to my mother, and had let the rest of my acquaintance go to the devil."

A quiet half hour passed, and the first visitor, a stranger to the servants, appeared at the cottage gate. He was a middle-aged man, and he had no wish to disturb Mr. Hardyman. "I will wait in the grounds," he said, "and trouble nobody." The middle-aged man who expressed himself in these modest terms was Robert Moody.

Five minutes later a carriage drove up to the gate. An elderly lady got out of it, followed by a fat white Scotch terrier that growled at every stranger within his reach. It is needless to introduce Lady Lydiard and Tommie.

Informed that Mr. Hardyman was at the stables, Lady Lydiard gave the servant her card. "Take that to your master, and say I won't detain him five minutes." With these words her ladyship sauntered into the grounds. She looked about her with observant eyes, not only noticing the tent which had been set up on the grass to accommodate the expected guests, but entering it and looking at the waiters who were engaged in placing the luncheon on the table. Returning to the outer world she next remarked that Mr. Hardyman's lawn was in very bad order. Barren, sun-dried patches, and little holes and crevices opened here and there by the action of the summer heat, announced that the lawn, like everything else at the farm, had been neglected in the exclusive attention paid to the claims of the horses. Reaching a shrubbery which bounded one side of the grounds next, her ladyship became aware of a man slowly approaching her, to all appearance absorbed in thought. The man drew a little nearer. She lifted her glasses to her eyes and recognized—Moody.

No embarrassment was produced on either side by this unexpected meeting. Lady Lydiard had, not long since, sent to ask her former steward to visit her, regretting in her warm hearted way the terms on which they had separated, and wishing to atone for the harsh language that had escaped her at their parting interview. In the friendly talk which followed the reconciliation Lady Lydiard not only heard the news of Moody's pecuniary inheritance, but, noticing the change in his appearance for the worse, contrived to extract from him the confession of his ill-starred passion for Isabel. To discover him now, after all that he had acknowledged, walking about the grounds at Hardyman's farm, took her ladyship completely by surprise. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed, in her loudest tones, "what are *you* doing here?"

"You mentioned Mr. Hardyman's garden party, my lady, when I had the honor of waiting on you," Moody answered. "Thinking over it afterwards, it seemed the fittest occasion I could find for making a little wedding present to Miss Isabel. Is there any harm in my asking Mr. Hardyman to let me put the present on her plate, so that she may see it when she sits down to luncheon? If your ladyship thinks so I will go away directly, and send the gift by post."

Lady Lydiard looked at him attentively. "You don't despise the girl?" she asked, "for selling herself for rank and money? I do, I can tell you."

Moody's worn white face flushed a little. "No, my lady," he answered, "I can't hear you say that. Isabel would not have engaged herself to Mr. Hardyman unless she had been fond of him—as fond, I dare say, as I once hoped she might be of me. It's a hard thing to confess that; but I do confess it, in justice to her—God bless her!"

The generosity that spoke in those simple words touched the finest sympathies in Lady Lydiard's nature. "Give me your hand," she said, with her own generous spirit kindling in her eyes. "You have a great heart, Moody. Isabel Miller is a fool for not marrying *you*—and one day she will know it."

Before a word more could pass between them, Hardyman's voice was audible on the other side of the shrubbery, calling irritably to his servant to find Lady Lydiard.

Moody retired to the farther end of the walk, while Lady Lydiard advanced in the opposite direction, so as to meet Hardyman at the entrance to the shrubbery. He bowed stiffly, and begged to know why her ladyship had honored him with a visit.

Lady Lydiard replied, without noticing the coldness of her reception:

"I have not been very well, Mr. Hardyman, or you would have seen me before this. My only object in presenting myself here is to make my excuses personally for having written of you in terms which expressed a doubt of your honor. I have done you an injustice, and I beg you to forgive me."

Hardyman acknowledged this frank apology as unreservedly as it had been offered to him. "Say no more, Lady Lydiard. And let me hope, now you are here, that you will honor my little party with your presence."

Lady Lydiard gravely stated her reasons for not accepting the invitation.

"I disapprove so strongly of unequal marriages," she said, walking on slowly towards the cottage, "that I cannot, in common consistency, become one of your guests. I shall always feel interested in Isabel Miller's welfare; and I can honestly say I shall be glad if your married life proves that my old-fashioned prejudice are without justification in your case. Accept my thanks for your invitation, and let me hope that my plain speaking has not offended you."

She bowed and looked about her for Tommie before she advanced to the carriage waiting for her at the gate. In the surprise of seeing Moody she had forgotten to look back for the dog when she entered the shrubbery. She now called to him, and blew the whistle at her watch chain. Not a sign of Tommie was to be seen. Hardyman instantly directed the servants to search in the cottage and out of the cottage for the dog. The order was obeyed with all needful activity and intelligence, and entirely without success. For the time being, at any rate, Tommie was lost.

Hardyman promised to have the dog looked for in every part of the farm, and to send him back in the care of one of his own men. With these polite assurances Lady Lydiard was obliged to be satisfied. She drove away in a very despondent frame of mind. "First Isabel and now Tommie," thought her ladyship. "I am losing the only companions who made life tolerable to me."

Returning from the garden gate, after taking leave of his visitor, Hardyman received from his servant a handful of letters which had just arrived for him. Walking slowly over the lawn as he opened them, he found nothing but excuses for the absence of guests who had already accepted his invitations. He had just thrust the letters into his pocket when he heard footsteps behind him, and, looking round, found himself confronted by Moody.

"Hallo! have you come here to lunch?" Hardyman asked, roughly.

"I have come here, sir, with a little gift for Miss Isabel, in honor of her marriage," Moody answered, quietly. "And I ask your permission to put it on the table, so that she may see it when your guests sit down to luncheon."

He opened a jeweler's case as he spoke, containing a plain gold bracelet with an inscription engraved on the inner side: "To Miss Isabel Miller, with the sincere good wishes of Robert Moody."

Plain as it was, the design of the bracelet was unusually beautiful. Hardyman had noticed Moody's agitation on the day when he had met Isabel near her aunt's house, and had drawn his own conclusions from it. His face darkened with a momentary jealousy as he looked at the bracelet. "All right, old fellow!" he said, with contemptuous familiarity. "Don't be modest. Wait and give it to her with your own hand."

"No, sir," said Moody. "I would rather leave it, if you please, to speak for itself."

Hardyman understood the delicacy of feeling which dictated those words, and, without well knowing why, resented it. He was on the point of speaking, under the influence of this unworthy feeling, when Isabel's voice reached his ears, calling to him from the cottage.

Moody's face contracted with a sudden expression of pain as he, too, recognized the voice. "Don't let me detain you, sir," he said, sadly. "Good morning!"

Hardyman left him without ceremony. Moody, slowly following, entered the tent. All the preparations for the luncheon had been completed; nobody was there. The places to be occupied by the guests were indicated by cards bearing their names. Moody found Isabel's card, and put his bracelet inside the folded napkin on her plate. For awhile he stood with his hand on the table, thinking. The temptation to communicate once more with Isabel before he lost her forever was fast getting the better of his powers of resistance. "If I could persuade her to write a word to say she liked her bracelet," he thought, "it would be a comfort when I go back to my solitary life." He tore a leaf out of his pocketbook and wrote on it: "One line to say you accept my gift and my good wishes. Put it under the cushion of your chair and I shall find it when the company have left the tent." He slipped the paper into the case which held the bracelet, and instead of leaving the farm as he had intended, turned back to the shelter of the shrubbery.

CHAPTER XXI.

Hardyman went on to the cottage. He found Isabel in some agitation. And there by her side with his tail wagging slowly and his eye on Hardyman in expectation of a possible kick—there was the lost Tommie!

"Has Lady Lydiard gone?" Isabel asked, eagerly.

"Yes," said Hardyman. "Where did you find the dog?"

As events had ordered it, the dog had found Isabel—under these circumstances:

The appearance of Lady Lydiard's card in the smoking room had been an alarming event for Lady Lydiard's adopted daughter. She was guiltily conscious of not having answered her ladyship's note, inclosed in Miss Pink's letter, and of not having taken her ladyship's advice in resisting the advances of Hardyman. As he rose to leave the room and receive his visitor in the grounds, Isabel entreated him to say no thing of her presence at the farm, unless Lady Lydiard exhibited a forgiving turn of mind by asking to see her. Left by he self in the smoking room she suddenly heard a bark in the passage which had a familiar sound in her ears. She opened the door, and in rushed Tommie, with one of his shrieks of delight. Curiosity had taken him into the house. He had heard the voices in the smoking room, had recognized Isabel's voice, and had waited, with his customary cunning and his customary distrust of strangers, until Hardyman was out of the way. Isabel kissed and caressed him, and then drove him out again to the lawn, fearing that Lady Lydiard might return to look for him. Going back to the smoking room, she stood at the window watching for Hardyman's return. When the servants came in to look for the dog, she could only tell them that she had last seen him in the grounds, not far from the cottage. The useless search being abandoned, and the carriage having left the gate, who should crawl out from the back of a cupboard in which some empty hampers were placed but Tommie himself! How he had contrived to get back to the smoking room (unless she had omitted to completely close the door on her return) it was impossible to say. But there he was, determined this time to stay with Isabel, and keeping in his hiding place until he heard the movement of the carriage wheels, which informed him that his lawful mistress had left the cottage. Isabel had at once called to Hardyman, on the chance that the carriage might yet be stopped. It was already out of sight, and nobody knew which of two roads it had taken, both leading to London. In this emergency Isabel could only look at Hardyman, and ask what was to be done.

"I can't spare a servant till after the party," he answered. "The dog must be tied up at the stables."

Isabel shook her head. Tommie was not accustomed to be tied up. He would make a disturbance, and he would be beaten by the grooms. "I will take care of him," she said. "He won't leave me."

"There's something else to think of besides the dog," Hardyman rejoined irritably. "Look at these letters!" He pulled them out of his pocket as he spoke. "Here are no less than seven men, all calling themselves my friends, who accepted my invitation, and who write to excuse themselves on the very day of the party! Do you know why? They're all afraid of my father; I forgot to tell you he's a cabinet minister as well as a lord. Cowards and cads! they have heard he isn't coming, and they think to curry favor with the great man by stopping away. Come along, Isabel! Let's take their names off the luncheon table. Not a man of them shall ever darken my doors again!"

"I am to blame for what has happened," Isabel answered sadly. "I am estranging you from your friends. There is still time, Alfred, to alter your mind and let me go."

He put his arm round her with rough fondness. "I would sacrifice every friend I have in the world rather than lose you. Come along!"

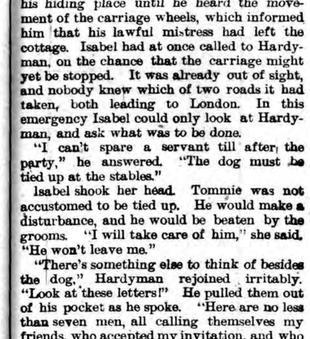
They left the cottage. At the entrance to the tent Hardyman noticed the dog at Isabel's heels, and vented his ill temper, as usual with male humanity, on the nearest unoffending creature that he could find. "Be off, you mongrel brute!" he shouted. The tail of Tommie relaxed from its customary tight curve over the small of his back, and the legs of Tommie (with his tail between them) took him at full gallop to the friendly shelter of the cupboard in the smoking room. It was one of those trifling circumstances which women notice seriously. Isabel said nothing; she only thought to herself, "I wish he had shown his temper when I first knew him."

They entered the tent.

"I'll read the names," said Hardyman, "and you find the cards and tear them up. Stop! I'll keep the cards. You're just the sort of woman my father likes. He'll be reconciled to me when he sees you, after we are married. If one of those men ever asks him for a place, I'll take care, if it's years hence, to put an obstacle in his way. Here, take my pencil, and make a mark on the cards to remind me; the same mark I set against a horse in my book when I don't like him—a cross inclosed in a circle." He produced his pocketbook. His hands trembled with anger as he gave the pencil to Isabel and laid the book on the table. He had just read the name of the first false friend, and Isabel had just found the card, when a servant appeared with a message. "Mrs. Drumblade has arrived, sir, and wishes to see you on a matter of the greatest importance."

Hardyman left the tent not very willingly. "Wait here," he said to Isabel; "I'll be back directly."

She was standing near her own place at the table. Moody had left one end of the jeweler's case visible above the napkin, to attract her attention. In a minute more the bracelet and the note were in her hands. She dropped on her chair, overwhelmed by



The bracelet and the note were in her hands.

the conflicting emotions that rose in her at the sight of the bracelet, at the reading of the note. Her head drooped, and the tears filled her eyes. "Are all women as blind as I have been to what is good and noble in the men who love them?" she wondered, sadly. "Better as it is," she thought, with a bitter sigh; "I am not worthy of him."

As she took up the pencil to write her answer to Moody on the back of her dinner card, the servant appeared again at the door of the tent.

"My master wants you at the cottage, miss, immediately."

Isabel rose, putting the bracelet and the note in the silver-mounted leather pocketbook (a present from Hardyman which hung at her belt. In the hurry of passing round the table to get out, she never noticed that her dress touched Hardyman's pocketbook, placed closed to the edge, and threw it down on the grass below. The book fell into one of the heat cracks which Lady Lydiard had noticed as evidence of the neglected condition of the cottage lawn.

"You ought to hear the pleasant news my sister has just brought me," said Hardyman, when Isabel joined him in the parlor. "Mrs. Drumblade has been told, on the best authority, that my mother is not coming to the party."

"There must be some reason of course, dear Isabel," added Mrs. Drumblade. "Have you any idea of what it can be? I haven't seen my mother myself, and all my inquiries have failed to find it out."

She looked searchingly at Isabel as she spoke. The mask of impurity on her face was admirably worn. Nobody who possessed only a superficial acquaintance with Mrs. Drumblade's character would have suspected how thoroughly she was enjoying in secret the position of embarrassment in which her news had placed her brother. Instinctively doubting whether Mrs. Drumblade's friendly behavior was quite so sincere as it appeared to be, Isabel answered that she was a stranger to Lady Rotherfield, and was therefore quite at a loss to explain the cause of her ladyship's absence. As she spoke, the guests began to arrive in quick succession, and the subject was dropped, as a matter of course.

It was not a merry party. Hardyman's approaching marriage had been made the topic of much malicious gossip, and Isabel's character had, as usual in such cases, become the object of all the false reports that scandal could invent. Lady Rotherfield's absence confirmed the general conviction that Hardyman was disgracing himself. The men were all sneers or lesseuneasy. The women resented the discovery that Isabel was, personally speaking at least, beyond the reach of hostile criticism. Her beauty was viewed as a downright offense; her refined and modest manners were set down as perfect acting—"Really disgusting, my dear, in so young a girl." Gen. Drumblade—a large and moldy veteran, in a state of chronic astonishment after his own matrimonial experience at Hardyman's folly in marrying at all—diffused a wide circle of gloom wherever he went and whatever he did. His accomplished wife, forcing her high spirits on everybody's attention with a sort of kittenish playfulness, intensified the depressing effect of the general dullness by all the force of the strongest contrast. After waiting half an hour for his mother, and waiting in vain, Hardyman led the way to the tent in despair. "The sooner I fill their stomachs and get rid of them," he thought, savagely, "the better I shall be pleased."

The luncheon was attacked by the company with a certain silent ferocity, which the waiters noticed as remarkable, even in their large experience. The men drank deeply, but with wonderfully little effect in raising their spirits; the women, with the exception of amiable Mrs. Drumblade, kept Isabel deliberately out of the conversation that went on among them. Gen. Drumblade, sitting next to her in one of the places of honor, disdoursed to Isabel privately on "my brother in law Hardyman's infernal temper." A young marquis, on her other side—a mere lad, chosen to make the necessary speech in acknowledgment of his superior rank—rose, in a state of nervous trepidation, to propose Isabel's health as the chosen bride of their host. Pale and trembling, conscious of having forgotten the words which he had learned beforehand, this unhappy young nobleman began: "Ladies and gentlemen, I haven't an idea—" He stopped, put his hand to his head, stared wildly, and sat down again, having contrived to state his own case with masterly brevity and perfect truth in a speech of seven words.

While the dismay in some cases and the amusement in others was still at its height, Hardyman's valet made his appearance, and approaching his master, said, in a whisper: "Could I speak to you, sir, for a moment outside?"

"What the devil do you want?" Hardyman asked, irritably. "Is that a letter in your hand? Give it to me."

The valet was a Frenchman. In other words, he had a sense of what was due to himself. His master had forgotten this. He gave up the letter with a certain dignity of manner, and left the tent. Hardyman opened the letter. He turned pale as he read it, crumpled it in his hand, and threw it down on the table. "By G—d, it's a lie!" he exclaimed, furiously.

The guests rose in confusion. Mrs. Drumblade, finding the letter within her reach, coolly possessed herself of it, recognized her mother's handwriting, and read these lines:

"I have only now succeeded in persuading your father to let me write to you. For God's sake break off your marriage at any sacrifice. Your father has heard, on unanswerable authority, that Miss Isabel Miller left her situation in Lady Lydiard's house on suspicion of theft."

While his sister was reading this letter, Hardyman had made his way to Isabel's chair. "I must speak to you directly," he whispered. "Come away with me." He turned as he took her arm, and looked at the table. "Where is my letter?" he asked. Mrs. Drumblade handed it to him dextrously crumpled up again as she had found it.

"No bad news, dear Alfred, I hope?" she said, in her most affectionate manner. Hardyman snatched the letter from her, without answering, and led Isabel out of the tent.

"Read that," he said, when they were alone; "and tell me at once whether it's true or false."

Isabel read the letter. For a moment the shock of discovery held her speechless. She recovered herself, and returned the letter.

"It is true," she answered.

Hardyman staggered back as if she had shot him.

"True that you are guilty?" he asked.

"No! I am innocent. Everybody who knows me believes in my innocence. It is true that the appearances were against me. They are against me still." Having said this, she waited, quietly and firmly, for his next words.

He passed his hand over his forehead with a sigh of relief. "It's bad enough as it is," he said, speaking quietly on his side. "But the remedy for it is plain enough. Come back to the tent."

She never moved. "Why?" she asked.

"Do you suppose I don't believe in your innocence, too?" he answered. "The one way of setting you right now is for me to make you my wife, in spite of the appearances that point to you. I'm too fond of you, Isabel, to give you up. Come back with me, and I will announce our marriage to my friends."

She took his hand and kissed it. "It is generous and good of you," she said; "but it must not be."

He took a step nearer to her. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"It was against my will," she pursued, "that my aunt concealed the truth from you. I did wrong to consent to it; I will do wrong no more. Your mother is right, Alfred. After what has happened, I am not fit to be your wife until my innocence is proved. It is not proved yet."

The angry color began to rise in his face once more. "Take care," he said; "I am not in a humor to be trifled with."

"I am not trifling with you," she answered, in low, sad tones.

"You really mean what you say?"

"I mean it."

"Don't be obstinate, Isabel. Take time to consider."

"Your are very kind, Alfred. My duty is plain to me. I will marry you—if you still wish it—when my good name is restored to me—not before."

He laid one hand on her arm, and pointed with the other to the guests in the distance, all leaving the tent on their way to their carriages.

"Your good name will be restored to you," he said, "on the day when I make you my wife. The worst enemy you have cannot associate my name with a suspicion of theft. Remember that, and think a little before you decide. You see those people there? If you don't change your mind by the time they have got to the cottage, it's good-by between us, and good-by forever. I refuse to wait for you; I refuse to accept a conditional engagement. Wait, and think. They're walking slowly; you have got some minutes more."

He still held her arm, watching the guests as they gradually receded from view. It was not until they had all collected in a group outside the cottage door that he spoke himself, or that he permitted Isabel to speak again.

"Now," he said, "you have had your time to get cool. Will you take my arm and join those people with me, or will you say good-by forever?"

"Forgive me, Alfred," she began gently. "I cannot consent, in justice to you, to shelter myself behind your name. It is the name of your family, and they have a right to expect that you will not degrade it."

"I want a plain answer," he interposed sternly. "Which is it? Yes or no?"

She looked at him with sad, compassionate eyes. Her voice was firm as she answered him in the one word that he desired. The word was—